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Anthony Blunt, Fourth Man in British Spying Scandal, Is Dead at 75

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LONDON, March 26 — Anthony Blunt, a former curator of Queen Elizabeth II's art collection who in 1979 was exposed as having been the mysterious fourth man in a Soviet spying ring, collapsed and died at breakfast in his London home today. He was 75 years old.

Mr. Blunt, who had a history of heart trouble, died in his elegant sixth-floor apartment near Marble Arch, according to his brother.

His exposure as the mysterious fourth man sought in the celebrated Burgess-Maclean-Philby spying scandal that rocked Britain in the 1950's and 1960's caused a sensation when it was brought to light by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in November 1979.

He was immediately stripped of a knighthood that had been conferred on him in 1956 and which he had retained even after the British authorities had heard him confess in 1964 to subversive activities that had reached back to his days as a brilliant young don at Cambridge University.

Recruited Spies for Soviet

In his confession Mr. Blunt acknowledged that he had recruited spies for the Soviet Union from among young radical students at Cambridge, passed information to the Russians while he served as a high-ranking British intelligence officer during World War II, and had helped two of his former Cambridge students who had become Soviet "moles" inside the British Foreign Service, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, escape to the Soviet Union in 1951 just as their activities were about to be exposed.

Mr. Burgess died in the Soviet Union in 1963 and the death of Mr. Maclean was announced just three weeks ago by Moscow. The other Soviet mole in the spy scandal, Harold (Kim) Philby, who also fled to the Soviet Union after his part in the espionage ring became known in 1963, is now the only surviving member of the spying ring that had its roots in the elite circle of Cambridge University radicals in the 1930's.

Mr. Blunt resigned from the British Academy, where he was recognized as a distinguished and much-honored art historian, but he was never directly punished by the British Government because he had been granted immunity from prosecution at the time he made his secret confession in 1964.

The revelation that he had maintained his reputation and standing in the upper reaches of social and art circles for 15 years after his role as a spy had become known to the authorities, was denounced in Parliament as an example of how individuals with powerful friends could be protected in British society.

There were also questions raised about why Mr. Blunt had been kept on after 1964 as curator of the Queen's art collection — formally known as Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures — when the Government learned of his spying. It was regarded as almost certain that the Queen herself had been informed of Mr. Blunt's confession. The explanation given was that his role at Buckingham Palace carried with it no access to classified information, and it was also decided not to embarrass him in any way that would end his continuing cooperation with the authorities on matters of intelligence.

Mr. Blunt served from 1947 to 1974 as director of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, and is credited with training a generation of art historians in England and winning the institute recognition as one of the best in the world for the study of art history.

But all his professional accomplishments were ultimately overshadowed by his early devotion to Communism and the betrayal of his country.

At Cambridge he was a central and influential figure in a university club called the Apostles, whose members, most of whom came from the ranks of the privileged, saw themselves as the leading intellectuals of revolution.

Tried to Recruit American

One American member of this circle, Michael Straight, in a book recently published, described how Mr. Blunt, then a young don, invited him in 1937 to become a Soviet agent in the United States. Mr. Straight said he declined the offer.

Later, during the Kennedy Administration, Mr. Straight revealed his contacts with Mr. Blunt and also Guy Bur-

gess to the F.B.I. He was subsequently interrogated by the British authorities, who told him that his information was the first substantive account of the espionage of Mr. Blunt, who at the time was Sir Anthony Blunt with personal connections at Buckingham Palace. It was this information that led to the questioning of Sir Anthony, his confession and acceptance of immunity in return for continued cooperation.

He had been under suspicion for many years before this break but had always maintained his innocence during several interrogations by Government officials. But confronted with Mr. Straight's allegations, he at last acknowledged his crimes. Sir Michael Havers, the British Attorney General, later described the moment.

"He maintained his denial," he said. "He was offered immunity from prosecution. He sat in silence for a while. He got up, looked out of the window, poured himself a drink and after a few minutes confessed."

Defended His Behavior

After his public unmasking nearly four years ago, Mr. Blunt said he had made "an appalling mistake" that he came to "bitterly regret," but he defended his past behavior in a brief statement:

"In the mid-1930's it seemed to me and to many of my contemporaries that the Communist Party and Russia constituted the only firm bulwark against Fascism, since the Western democracies were taking an uncertain, compromising attitude towards Germany."

Details of the nature of the espionage carried out by Mr. Blunt for the Russians has never been revealed, although it is believed that while his activities damaged British interests they did not directly cause loss of life or compromise military operations.